



Review: George Gemistos Plethon

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GEORGE GEMISTOS PLETHON

C. M. WOODHOUSE: *George Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes*. Pp. xxi + 391. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. £40.

The 'Platonist' George Gemistos Plethon has always excited the interest of historians of the decline and fall of Byzantium. What to make of him is another matter. Born in Constantinople (c. 1360) he found a refuge at Mistra, where he lived out his long life, dying in 1452. It is possible that residing so close to the ruins of ancient Sparta unhinged him, bearing in mind his programme for a return to its social order and his plans for a revival of the Olympian religion of ancient Greece. It has equally been argued that however bizarre the presentation his ideas were fairly conventional. His plans for economic and social reform were in that autarkic tradition that can be traced back at least to the Nicaean Empire. His religious ideas fit into that long-standing tradition of attempting to reconcile Neoplatonism with Christianity. In the same way, his contacts with Italian humanists give rise to quite contradictory assessments. Was he a bridge between East and West, alerting Italian humanists to the importance of Plato, or was his contribution quite superficial because they were unable to understand him? The present study clears away much of the confusion surrounding Gemistos Plethon. If the author had any preconceived notions about his subject, he soon abandoned them. He takes as his starting point the assessments of the man made by his contemporaries and near contemporaries. It is clear that they did not know what to make of him either. A devotee, such as Demetrios Raoul Kabakes, was quite open about Gemistos Plethon's devotion to the worship of the Sun. Cardinal Bessarion, a pupil, was at pains to stress that his master remained a Christian. His exposition of pagan doctrine was to be explained (away?) as allegory. His main opponent, the future Patriarch Gennadios, was convinced that he aimed to restore paganism, but even he could not conceal his admiration for the man. This is another element in the enigma of Gemistos Plethon. Almost without exception he aroused the wonder and admiration of his contemporaries, both Byzantine and Italian. To his death he exerted some sort of moral and intellectual ascendancy over the court of Mistra; so much so that, though a layman, he was co-opted to the Byzantine delegation to the council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-9). There his opinion on the Procession of the Holy Ghost was sought by the Patriarch Joseph II with the words, 'You are an old man and a good one, who puts the truth before everything'. His advice was shrewd and to the point. His one recorded (and uninvited) intervention in the proceedings of the council was the only occasion when the Latins were worsted. The argument revolved around the wording of the creed approved by the second Council of Nicaea (787). A Latin version contained the addition of the *filioque*. Gemistos Plethon's riposte was devastatingly simple: in that case why had Aquinas and other Latin theologians bothered to elaborate complicated syllogisms to support the Latin case over the Procession of the Holy Spirit?

His reputation in Italy was still further enhanced by the lectures he gave during the council on the differences between Plato and Aristotle. The impression these made was such that some twenty years later the ruler of Florence Cosimo de' Medici founded a Platonic Academy in memory of him. That father of epigraphy Ciriaco of Ancona made two visits to Mistra to see him. The author suggests (p. 228) that it was his enthusiasm for this 'most learned of the Greeks in our time' that inspired Sigismondo Malatesta to bring back Gemistos Plethon's remains from Mistra in 1464

and rebury them in the place of honour in his Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini. There is no doubt that Gemistos Plethon caught the imagination of humanist circles in Italy, but his direct influence seems to have been minimal. As the author convincingly shows, there were so few who could even have understood him. The author is not even certain that his ideas had a much greater impact in Byzantium. He never had many pupils, even if Bessarion was one of them. He might be referred to as a *mystagogos*, but it is doubtful that he built up any substantial following of initiates into his pagan mysteries, even if he composed a liturgy and hymns to the Olympian Gods. The debate he initiated on the respective merits of Plato and Aristotle petered out among the expatriate Byzantine scholars in Italy and never attracted much attention from Italian humanists.

Reluctantly the author decides that Gemistos was a figure of secondary importance. He failed to 'establish Plato in the place of Aristotle as the foundation of metaphysical speculation and hence of physical science as well. Instead he succeeded unintentionally in fascinating the West with Platonic imagery and poetry, which affected writers and artists more than philosophers and scientists' (p. x). Such a pessimistic assessment does not detract in the slightest from this absorbing and accomplished study. Gemistos Plethon was a man of contradictions, but also a man that counted in his own day. One of the many merits of this book is that one begins to understand why. The key is the way Gemistos Plethon's life divides into two very unequal halves. The watershed came at the council of Florence (1438–9), when he was around eighty. It was a formative experience. All his major works were written between then and his death in 1452. For most of his long life he followed a career that was scarcely unprecedented in Byzantium – that of the philosopher-cum-civil servant and politician. Both Michael Psellos and Theodore Metochites used their learning and knowledge of the Neoplatonic tradition to carve out successful careers at court. Where Gemistos Plethon differed was that in extreme old age he threw off the pretence of conventional Christianity. At an earlier period Christianity would not have appeared as bankrupt as it did to Plethon in the aftermath of the council of Florence. Almost nothing had been settled. No help was forthcoming against the Turks. Their dynamism and moral edge contrasted with Byzantine feebleness and factiousness and were seen by Plethon to derive from Islam. Quite unrealistically, he hoped to find the moral resources for a Hellenic revival in a return to the true faith which he traced back via Plato and Pythagoras to Zoroaster. If Plethon had only lived the normal span of years, he would have fitted quite comfortably into a particularly Byzantine mould. As it was, he took a significant strand of Byzantine intellectual life, Neoplatonism, towards its logical conclusion but so intertwined had it become with Christianity that, as the author points out (p. 361), 'Plethon could not entirely repudiate Christianity'. For all that he subtitled the book, *The Last of the Hellenes*; one great service that the author has done is to make Gemistos Plethon comprehensible in terms of Byzantine tradition.

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